







Fresno's tunnels a gateway to secret history of Chinatown

By Juliana Barbassa, The Associated Press

FRESNO — Tunnels run beneath Chinatown: The brick-walled passages once were home to people and activities that couldn't be mentioned aboveground.

Rick Lew knows because he walked the passages as a child, entering through a trapdoor in his grandfather's liquor store.

"There was a nightlife you couldn't see from the streets," he says.

To many others, the lace-work of tunnels sprawling under the city was just another tall tale from Fresno's days as a Western railroad town and a hub of gambling and prostitution.

Now, a group of archeologists is using ground-penetrating radar to find evidence of the secret passages, which are believed to branch out from long-abandoned basements littered with cobwebs and filth.

The project, funded by the city and headed by a group working to preserve Chinatown, will take data gathered via radar and compare the findings with the memories of those who recall the neighborhood's heyday, says Kathy Omachi, vice president of Chinatown Revitalization. That will help archeologists decide where to dig trenches and look for the passages.

The approximately six blocks just west of the railroad tracks that make up the historic Chinatown were Fresno's birthplace, says Karana Hattersley-Drayton, the city's historic preservation officer. Unlike the better-known Chinese enclaves of San Francisco and New York, there's little left of it today — at least on the surface.

Fire insurance maps from the 1880s show a densely populated area, a stark contrast from the wide-open ranch and farm country all around.

It was home to Chinese laborers who laid Fresno's foundations and to successive layers of immigrants — Japanese, Armenians, Mexicans, Portuguese, Basques and others — who were kept separate from the growing white population by the iron boundary of the train tracks.

The area long housed family-run stores, temples, churches, Chinese and Japanese schools. It also was host to illicit activities kept out of the "good side of town": gambling, drinking during Prohibition and prostitution.



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Omachi's father, a Japanese immigrant, was born here in 1913 "between a bar and a house of ill repute," she says.

Many establishments had basements, some of them interconnected. Of those that can still be seen today, some end in bricked-off walls that longtime residents say hide tunnel entrances.

As late as the 1950s, when Lew was a boy, Chinatown was still thriving — both its respectable establishments and its shadier side.

He remembers visiting the underground world with his father: first passing though a dark basement before descending into a lit tunnel with an arched roof and enough space for two people to pass by each other. He recognized people there from the neighborhood.

Then there were the glamorous women whose images remain seared in his memory decades later. "They were off to the side, in bright satin dresses, one red, one blue," says Lew, speculating that they were probably prostitutes. "I later asked my father about it. He said it was something we don't mention."

Jon Brady, lead archeologist on the project, says the tunnels may have been built to provide cool underground storage in a region known for sweltering summer heat. They later proved handy for other purposes, even escape when necessary.

"These groups that lived on the fringe could have resorted to them to protect themselves, communicate away from public view, who knows what else," Brady says.

Local lore holds, though it still hasn't been proved by research, that a tunnel one time extended beyond the railroad tracks into the traditionally white part of town, possibly allowing "respectable" citizens access to the illicit charms of Chinatown.

"Some say that was blown up during Prohibition," says Hattersley-Drayton. "I'm hearing that from a lot of people, but we just don't know yet."

In the 1950s and '60s, many of Chinatown's buildings were torn down to make way for new development or freeways, and much of the history was buried, Lew says.

Today, Fresno's Chinatown is largely abandoned, peopled by the homeless, many of its facades boarded up. It's a part of the region's history that's largely forgotten. As downtown develops, it's critical "to look at where we were," says Patti Miller, spokeswoman for the city.

Someday, Hattersley-Drayton hopes, Chinatown and its excavated tunnels might be developed for heritage tourism, bringing some income to the now-impoverished area. For now, however, researchers just want to understand what's there.

"This is a first step, and it's about approaching parts of community history that are not in books," Brady says. "Parts that are literally below the surface, but that deserve to be told."

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